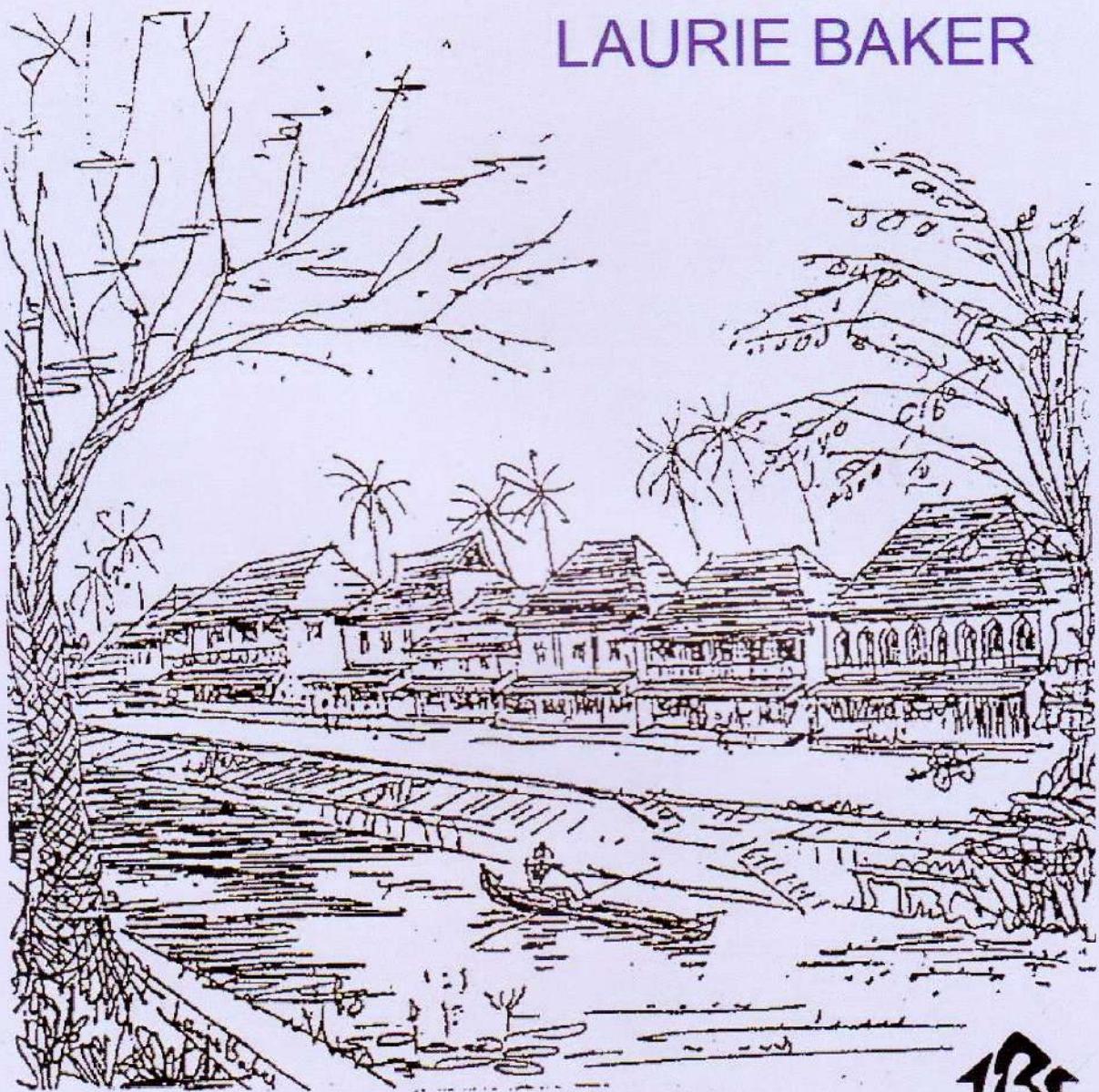


# WHAT IS AN ? ARCHITECT

LAURIE BAKER



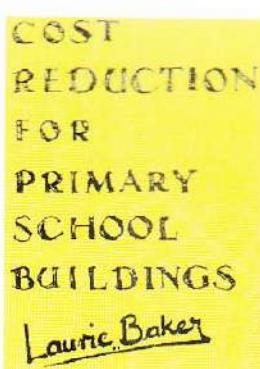
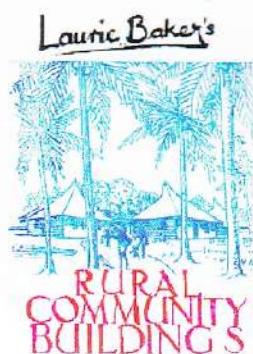
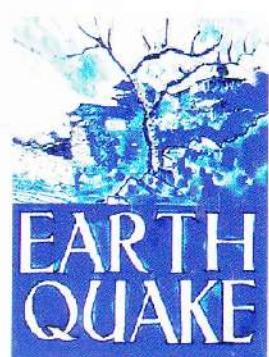
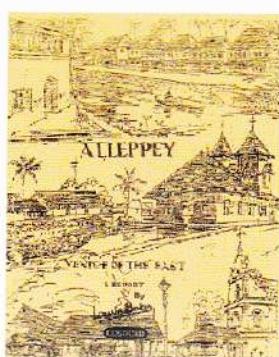
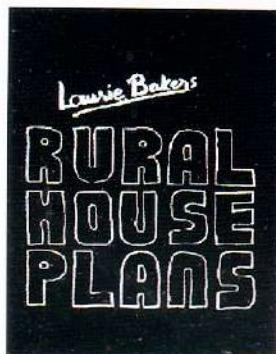
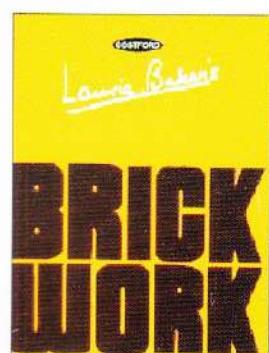
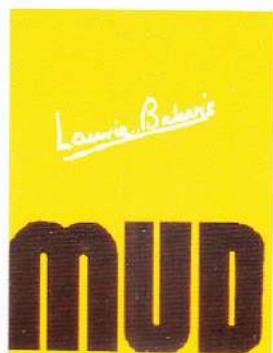
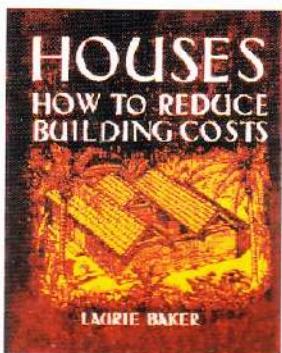
COSTFORD



LAURIE  
BAKER  
CENTRE

FOR HABITAT STUDIES

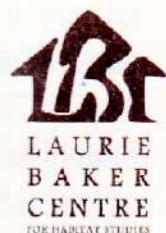
## Other titles in the series



WHAT IS  
AN  
ARCHITECT ?

Laurie Baker

COSTFORD



# **What is an Architect?**

**Laurie Baker**

All sketches, paintings and handwriting:

Laurie Baker

(English)

(Essay)

First published

**March 2016**

Published by

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Price: Rs. 50/-

## **Foreword**

This short statement first prepared for a lecture in 1997 by Laurie Baker sums up, in my opinion, his life's message as an architect. It conveys all that he believed in as an architect as well as a humanist par excellence. He doesn't merely preach; instead conveys his thoughts through his life experience beginning with Britain and ending with India. Laurie Baker was a Gandhian and he practised what he preached.

When he says that an Architect should be like a musical Conductor he brings out the need for a holistic approach to the profession that demands close interaction with other specialists as well as workers. He worked closely with his colleagues and construction workers and regularly visited the sites of his projects, whether it was a small residence for a poor person or a large institutional building.

His emphasis on cost reduction arose from his concern for the poor who could not afford the high expenditure on housing but he did not want to build 'poor houses' for them and instead championed 'housing for the poor' in sharp contrast to the public housing schemes that provides match-box type tiny houses to the poor with abysmally meagre expenditure that he makes fun of.

## **What is an Architect?**

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Laurie Baker's concern for conservation and environmental sustainability is grounded on solid economics as one can decipher from this statement. His revulsion to ostentation and flaunting of wealth is not only rooted in conservation of scarce resources but also public morality which he puts as the need for 'Good manners'.

The message that Laurie Baker conveys through this statement is simple but powerful. I hope the younger generation, especially those who are going to enter the profession of architecture as well as construction, will draw inspiration from Laurie Baker and set an example for respecting nature and building a society devoid of deprivation and inequality.

Laurie Baker explains the occasion when he wrote this statement sometime in early 1997. He gave a copy to P.B. Sajan who was working closely with him at the COSTFORD for publication in a journal called People and Development which the COSTFORD had started but could not continue. It got buried in the files until very recently when it was retrieved to our great joy. We have therefore great pleasure in publishing this statement that we consider as our manifesto.

**K.P. Kannan**

Chairman

Centre of Science & Technology for Rural Development  
and Laurie Baker Centre for Habitat Studies

2 March 2016

## WHAT IS AN ARCHITECT ?

The Dictionary says that an architect is a "Professor of Building who prepares plans and supervises their construction work".

Someone who had had a classical education said that the Ancient Greeks decided that there are three 'Arts'. When he was asked what these 'Three Arts' are - he thought quickly & said "Music, Painting and Fancy Cake Making (of which Architecture is a sub-division.)"

When I started my architectural education sixty-five years ago - the Director / Principal gave us all a pep-talk which I still remember, in parts, quite clearly. The city in which we lived had a famous orchestra & several of its members were individually famous for their musical instrument playing. The Conductor of the whole orchestra was also not only one of the leading Conductors in the country but he was equally famous for his playing of the piano, the harpsichord & the organ. Our Director said that eventually we, when we became fully qualified architects, would be in a similar position to that of our City Orchestra Conductor - we may have acquired one or two special skills - but we would also have to be 'the Conductor' of a whole group of people - craftsmen and technicians who would be converting our designs & plans into actual buildings. Some of them would perhaps be first class, well known, specialists, while others would just know how to get on with ordinary jobs like

## What is an Architect?

digging trenches & mixing mortar and so on. Now - two thirds of a century later – I agree with his definition of the architects job & I often feel grateful to him for letting us know what would be expected of us once we became architects.

Recently, architects of the four peninsular states, members of the Indian Institute of Architects, met in Trivandrum for a conference & the theme for deliberation was ‘The changing Role of the Architect’. So quite a lot of what I am now writing for ‘People & Development’ are the thoughts I had while preparing for this conference & I spoke about this

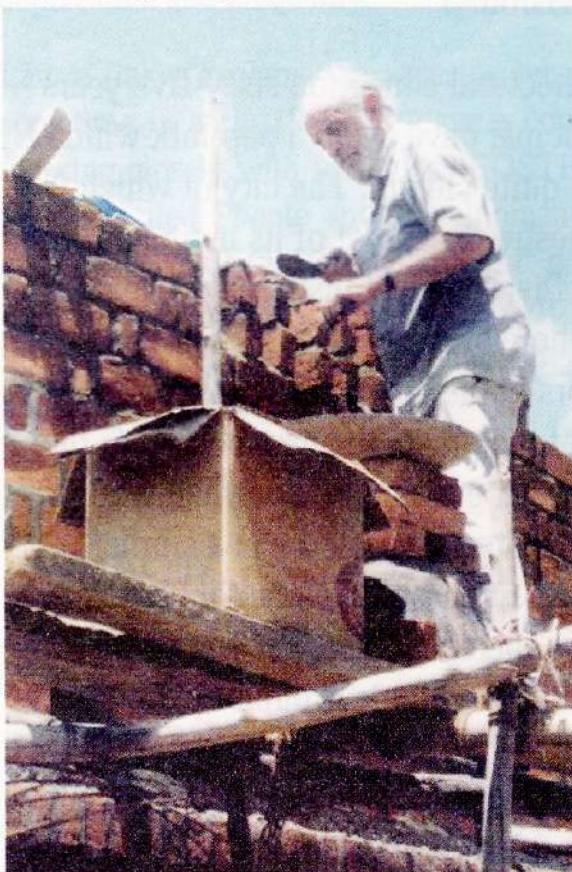


Photo: Keith Saldanah

comparison that my early Director had told us about the similarity between the musical Conductor & the Designing, Supervising Architect. I could see that some members were pleased with the comparison – while others felt that it might have been applicable 50 years ago – but the whole building situation has changed & now –

almost everything to do with building seems to be "specialist" and "HiTec" & it is quite impossible for an architect to be the 'Conductor' of such a highly skilled & developed crowd.

Another person quoted an old Victorian saying "Jack of All Trades is Master of None".

I can see the validity of some of these criticisms but there are several circumstances & conditions today which make it almost impossible to say that the Architect must be this& he must do that or he has to give way to the other! So I would like to make a list of some of these varying circumstances & conditions.

I think that, first of all, we have to be sensible & understanding about our own country, India.

There is its size. It is roughly the same overall area as that of the whole of Europe.

Its population is greater than that of the whole of Europe.

The variety of its States is as wide & differing as the variety of countries in Europe. In Europe there are the cold northern countries. There are the countries with the sea & ocean adjoining them. There are the high mountainous countries like Switzerland - and there are countries hemmed in between bigger& more powerful countries. Almost all of these individual countries have their own individual 'flavour' - their style of living, their occupations, their 'brand' of religion, their own climate & topography - & their own

## What is an Architect?

special style of architecture, and all this also applies to the states that, put together are our one single country – India.

So – obviously – India has many styles of architecture & many of our states have their own very distinctive &



From the cover of People & Development

beautiful architectural style. Similarly some states contain huge metropolis-cities but only a thin scattering of small villages – while other states – like our Kerala has no such metropolis & many of our important towns are quite rural in nature.

So I think that in India we have the need and the scope for all sorts of Architect! Those who are called upon to build huge high-rise buildings, huge sports stadia, huge factories & so on, while there is an almost unlimited scope for 'small' architects to build for more small individual buildings -



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particularly normal houses for the different strata of our society. In the first case – obviously – the need for Big Specialists is often there & the architect cannot be expected to know as much as one of these specialists, let alone as much as several of them. In the other case – one architect can be expected to be a specialist on his own & have a good working knowledge of the work of the “normal specialists” like plumbers, electricians & so on. But – we must remember all the time that each state has its own special requirements, its own standards, not to mention its own access to some materials but not to others and so on.

There is one other point I want to mention – again it goes back to my architectural education. As we all know – when we go for an examination – we have had to do a lot of study

& memorisation of all sorts of facts. These days our systems & materials & technologies have become so numerous that we can no longer retain so much knowledge in our heads & we now can rely, instead, on our computers.

But – I’m happy to say that in the nineteen thirties the only computer we had was our own head. So my college

made history in the academic world by, one year – it was my third year – announcing that during our next end-of-the-year



exams – we could, during the exam, make use of the library! This sent shock waves all round the country – but the reasoning was that, every year, knowledge & technologies increased at an alarming speed - & so it was far more important to know where to look for & get new, specialist knowledge & information than to try & keep in our heads a whole garbage container full of facts we didn't really understand & couldn't be expected to remember in detail and might never need! So – again – I think this is all very applicable to the Architect today.



UP-LOADING

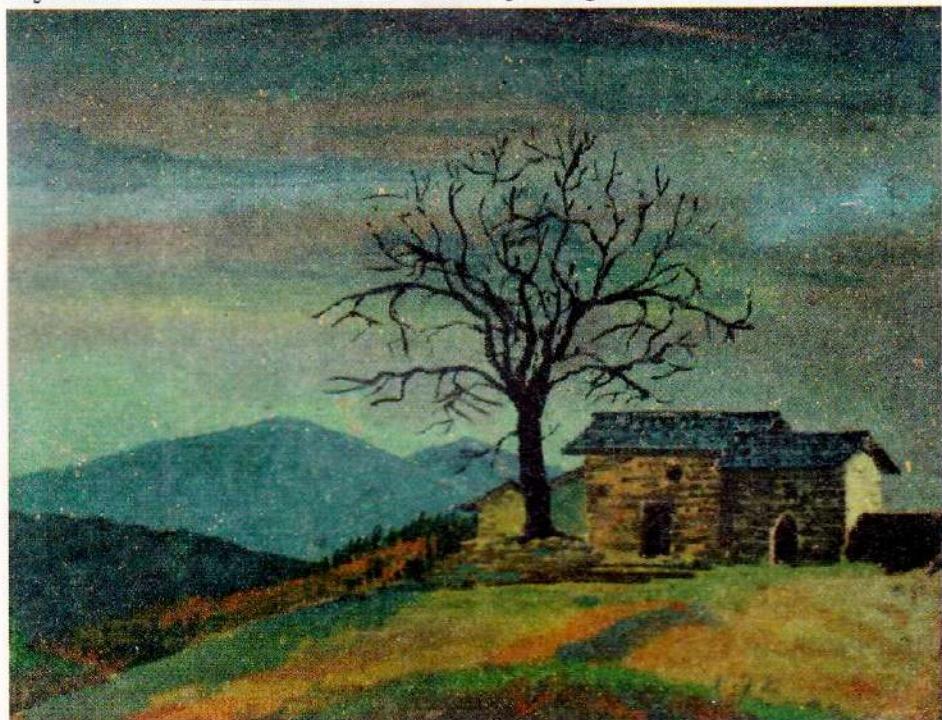
There's no harm in being a specialist – but you must know who the right specialist is & you must know your own limitations & know when to use the specialist. In the so-called 'modern' urban world of new architecture, the architect, once his design & planning is done – has to rely on his 'orchestra' of specialists – but in the 'ordinary' town & village & rural setting he will not be able to use such 'hitec' systems, nor will he want to use them and he will need to be the knowledgeable conductor of a small orchestra of the different facets of building workers.

## What is an Architect?

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However – I personally believe that an architect, before, or besides, being a conductor of a building ‘orchestra’ has some special duties and responsibilities.

These days we are always talking about environment. To many people the word just means having a lot of trees & parks & grass & flowers & fresh air etc. – but the dictionary says that our environment is everything that surrounds us.



That is – the things we can see & smell & hear – even social conditions & natural conditions like famine or war – or epidemics – or floods & draught. This means that the buildings we design are very much a big part of our environment - especially in cities, towns & colonies & villages. Furthermore – unlike the works of artists who paint pictures & carve sculptures etc – these are usually only found in art galleries or on the walls of wealthy peoples

houses. It is true – yes – they are a part of these peoples environment. But what we create is seen by everyone – or, anyway, all the people who pass along the road. They see our work as part of their environment & they have no option but to see it – whether it is bad & ugly or good & beautiful. So – to my mind – we architects must always keep in mind that we are building not only for a particular client – but we are also adding a very large conspicuous part of everyone's environment. This is not just an interesting or quaint point of view but, I believe, a very very big responsibility to ALL architects.

Next – I think Architects have a Social Responsibility. By that, I mean that designing & putting up a building is not only a little project & concern of the client & the architect. For example – while I am building a house for a “middle class” man & his family – or even more so when the client is well established, probably a professional, with a reserve of funds that enable him to spend several lakhs on a new house on land that has also cost a very large sum of money – I find it impossible not to think of probably more than a hundred million people – or thirty to forty million families who are homeless (&, of course, land less.) A year or so ago there was a grand scheme to build – first a million, &, a bit later – ten million houses for these poor homeless families (mainly rural). The grand sum to be allowed for the building of one such ‘House’ was at first Rs.9,000/- After I had pointed out that I had had to replace my old refrigerator which had expired – with a new one – not a grand one – just a small one for the needs of my wife & I - & it had cost me Rs.12,500/-!

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The Rs.9,000/- for a house was nobly increased to  
Rs.10,000/-!

THE NEW INDIAN EXPRESS  
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM • THURSDAY • SEPTEMBER 30, 1999

BRIEFS

**Evacuate slum  
dwellers: HC**

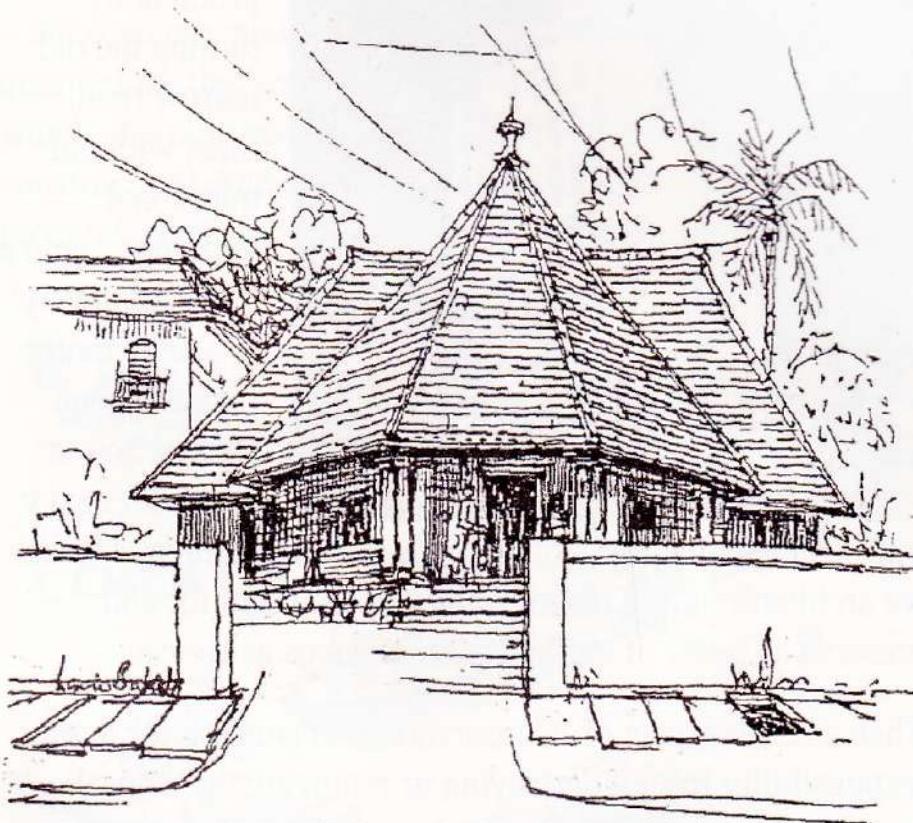
New Delhi: The Delhi High Court has ordered eviction of about 5,000 slum dwellers near the New Delhi railway station for expansion of rail tracks. The court directed officials to evacuate them by December 1 and if required use police force. The court was hearing a PIL filed by 'Dainik Railway Yatri Sangh'. PTI

*Let us hope that Their Lordships told the Five thousand slum dwellers where to evacuate to !*

So! – are we architects so soul-less – so selfish – so busy with grand & important schemes - & so considerate to those who will pay us handsomely for our 'services' – that we

either forget or ignore those who have nothing – no land – no home – no work – no money? I sometimes wonder whether there shouldn't be a law which makes people who spend on land & house ten lakhs – also spend ten thousand on a house for a 'HaveNot'.

Or – in other words, the architect should have a part in the responsibility of providing for the well being of all strata of society.



One of the lost heritage buildings on MG Road, Thiruvananthapuram

Another sphere in which I think we architects must share responsibility is conservation & preservation. This covers quite a wide range of subjects. Almost every town & city has

## What is an Architect?

old, good, interesting & often beautiful buildings. Unfortunately for those who desire the Progress of Commerce, these old buildings are often in the centres of towns where the land value has gone up to astronomical costs – or they are along roads which have in the past 20 or 30 years become “important” “main” highways. So the first casualty in Town Development are these old ‘heritage’ buildings. In some parts of the world they have solved the



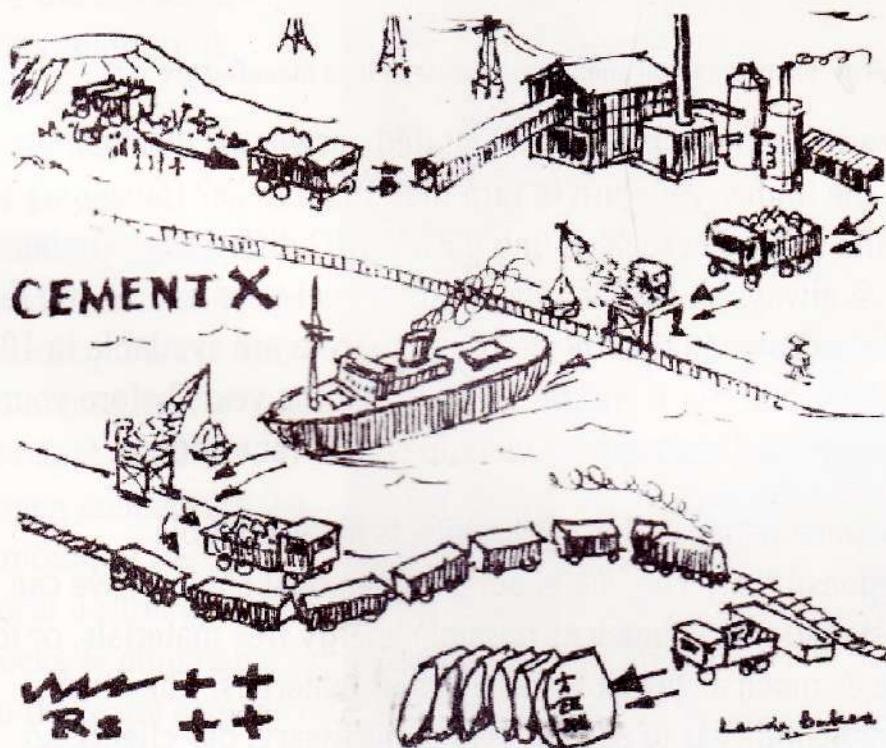
problem by turning the old narrow road, lined with old traditional buildings – into a ‘pedestrian way’ & a new motor road has been constructed to deal with heavy

traffic etc. behind, or parallel to, these old buildings. I think we architects have a responsibility to help care for and preserve as many of our heritage buildings as we can.

Then another aspect of ‘Conservation’ is concern for & the responsibility for not destroying or removing the natural wealth of our country – such as trees, streams & riversides, open spaces with gardens & lawns. Are we all so conceited to believe that anything we can design & build is more beautiful than a rain tree? – a deodar – a coconut palm, etc.? Obviously this sort of urge can be carried to cranky extremes

- but we first have the duty & responsibility to see whether we can so place our buildings so that a minimum of natural growth is destroyed.

Then - far worse - is that we don't seem to take into consideration that many of our so-called 'modern' materials such as steel, cement, aluminium, asbestos, etc. cause, for their manufacture, enormous destruction of natural resources. We have mountains of iron ore across the country - but such mountains are literally disappearing as they are quarried for the 'iron rock' that will be converted into steel - which, it would seem, is indispensable to building construction! And then it is not only a question of taking a mountain apart for the iron ore. An enormous amount of fuel



Energy, environmental and price impacts of cement manufacture.

## What is an Architect?

- (we give it the grand name of 'Energy') is necessary for the manufacture of nearly all these 'modern' materials. We destroy endless hectares of land to mine coal, - or we desecrate the countryside to bore for oil - we dig or blast lime stone for cement - & again, a lot of energy is required in the conversion of limestone & other calcium natural resources to turn them into cement.



### Energy, environmental and price impacts of lime manufacture.

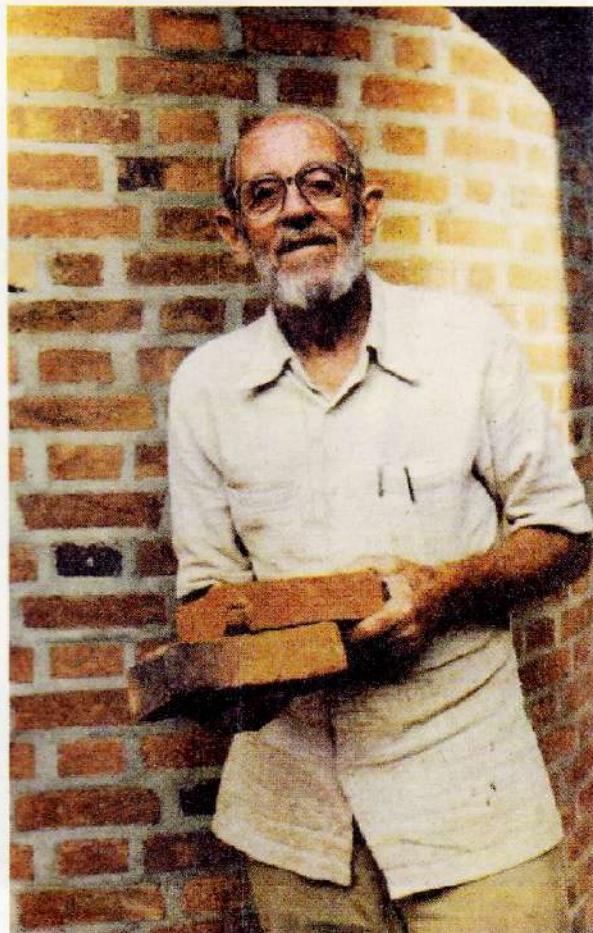
Nearly always this gets the taunting answer of 'what about all the timber you burn to turn mud into bricks? (& so on.) Quite true - but there is one VERY BIG difference. Timber is, & always should be, replaceable. Fuel trees can be cut, & others grown in their places & more trees are available in 10 or 20 years. But it will be 10 or 20 million years before your iron ore, or limestone, or bauxite etc. is 'renewed'.

So, personally, I think we architects have a double responsibility. The one is our own personal choice - we can design to use as much as possible energy free materials, or to use as much as possible 'renewable' materials. The other responsibility is to educate, when necessary, our clients, so

that they won't want us to specify unnecessarily these energy-intensive materials.

There are quite a lot of simple examples when we don't use our common sense in these matters. For one example, these days we use cement blocks – cement soil – cement sand – cement concrete etc. to avoid using timber for burning mud into bricks & tiles. But we don't bother to find out that by using a 5% or a 10% cement mixture with the mud – first we use far more cement in such a wall than we would use in the mortar for a brick wall of the same dimensions. The burnt bricks are, anyway in Kerala & several states, burned – fired – with the waste wood from trees cut for the timber in their main trunk.

The smaller branches which are of no use for building timber, are sold or auctioned for burning bricks. And of course, no thought at all is given concerning the amount of fuel, & local destruction of rocks & mountains to make the cement itself.



What is an Architect?

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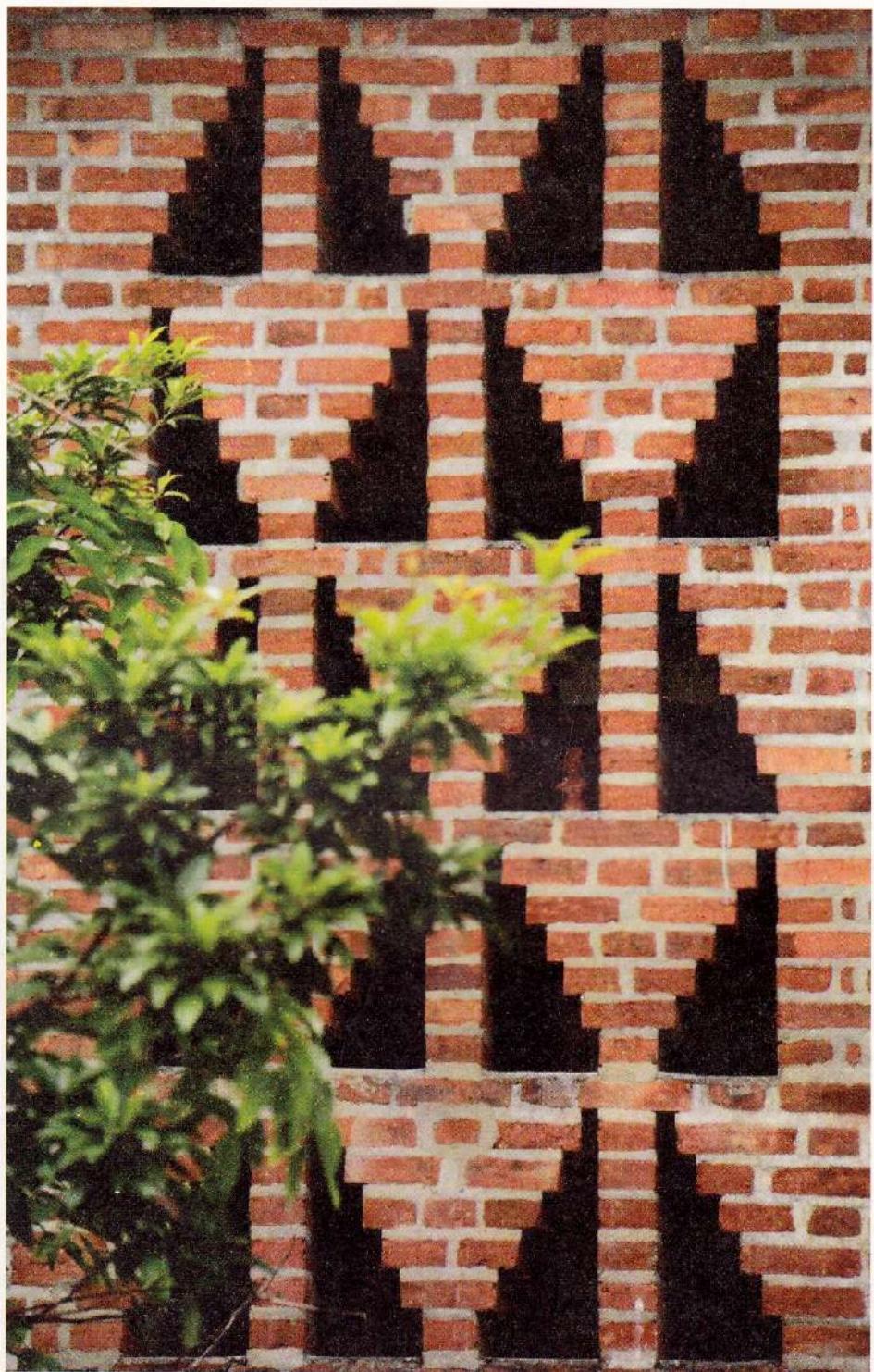


Photo: Prasanth Mohan

In fact – these days an architect (like most other people) cannot be a purist & we have to balance one material or technology against another & cause as little destruction as possible.

On the whole, the use of local materials, with as little manufacturing as possible, will help to make the world last longer & remain friendly to us. But are we architects aware of, or convinced of all this sort of thing? At least we have a responsibility to follow these principles with common sense & I think too we have the responsibility to explain to others the dangers & foolishness of the extravagant use of energy intensive materials & to ‘conserve’ as much as possible.

There is one other point I want to bring to your notice. In our day to day social life of mixing with, working with, living with other fellow human beings we use what are called ‘Good manners’. On the whole, they stem from the need to be considerate to other people’s needs & feelings. They are a sort of oil to make the complicated machinery of living easy & smooth & not to get nesty & gummed up! Different communities have different eating habits, clothing fashions, greeting & farewells etc. Some of these ‘manners’ get worn out or meaningless because we use them without thinking what the reason for them is. For instance – some communities say ‘Thank you’ for any little thing done for them. At table you ask for the salt or pepper & then say ‘Thank you’. Another day you fall into a ditch or a river & someone pulls you out - & you still use the same words ‘Thank you’ for having your life saved! Another form of manners is to conform, within reason, to normal customs. If

## What is an Architect?

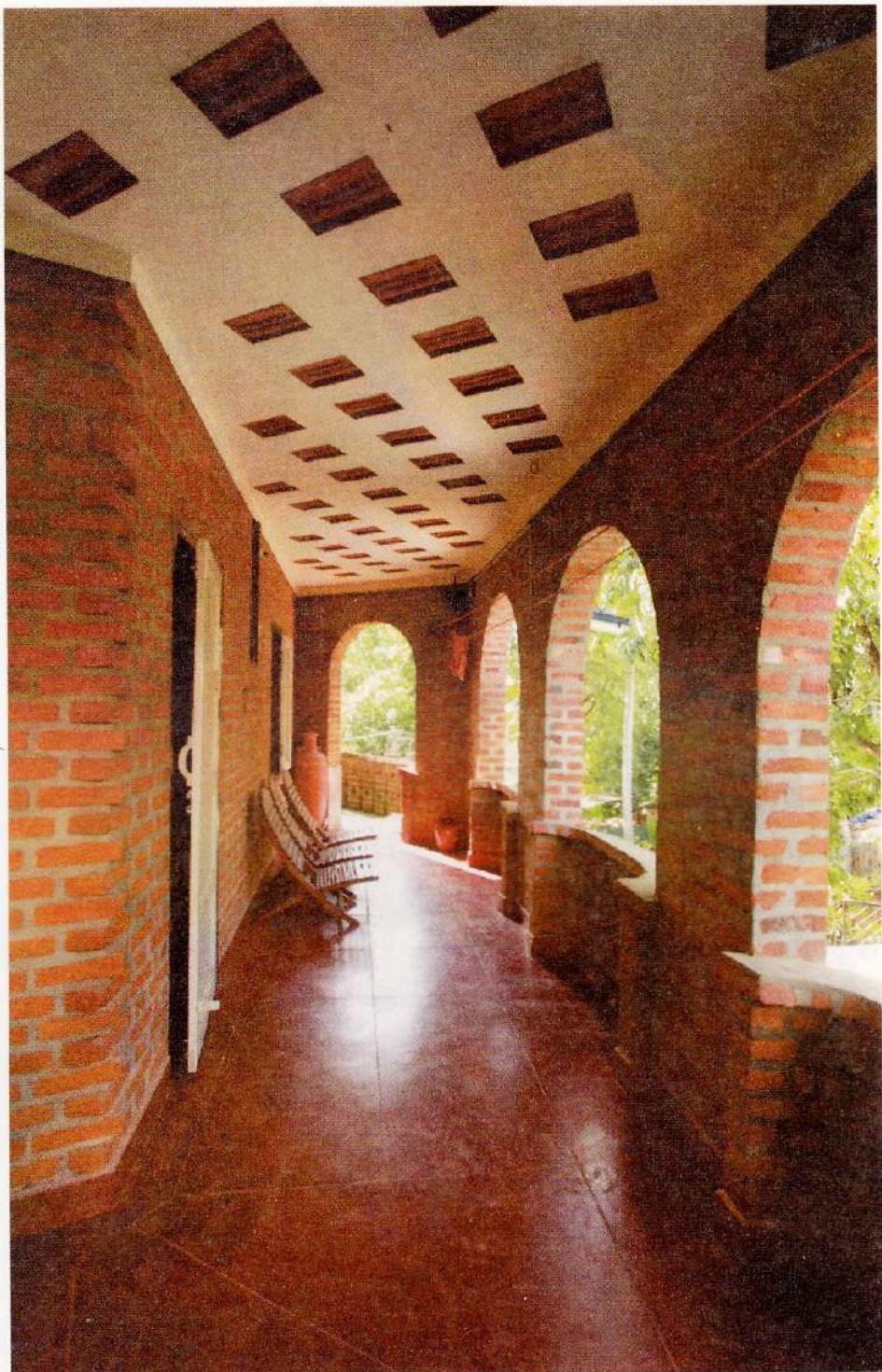


Photo: Prasanth Mohan

you are going on a picnic you use jeans & informal clothes - & if going to an official dinner or banquet you use formal clothes & so on - & it is usually considered to be poor, or bad manners to go to the banquet in your picnic jeans - so on. I believe there are also architectural & building manners. It is in bad taste to flaunt wealth - expensive veneers & polished marble & so on where 'ordinary people' live & have had to build as economically as possible. Our buildings should not be obtrusive - & 'show off'. They should be in harmony with their surroundings & give pleasure - & not give a shock!

To sum up - the title of the article was 'what is an Architect?' The dictionary said he is a Professor of Buildings & one who prepares plans & supervises these buildings.

This may be correct - but, to me it is only one tenth of his code of living & practise.

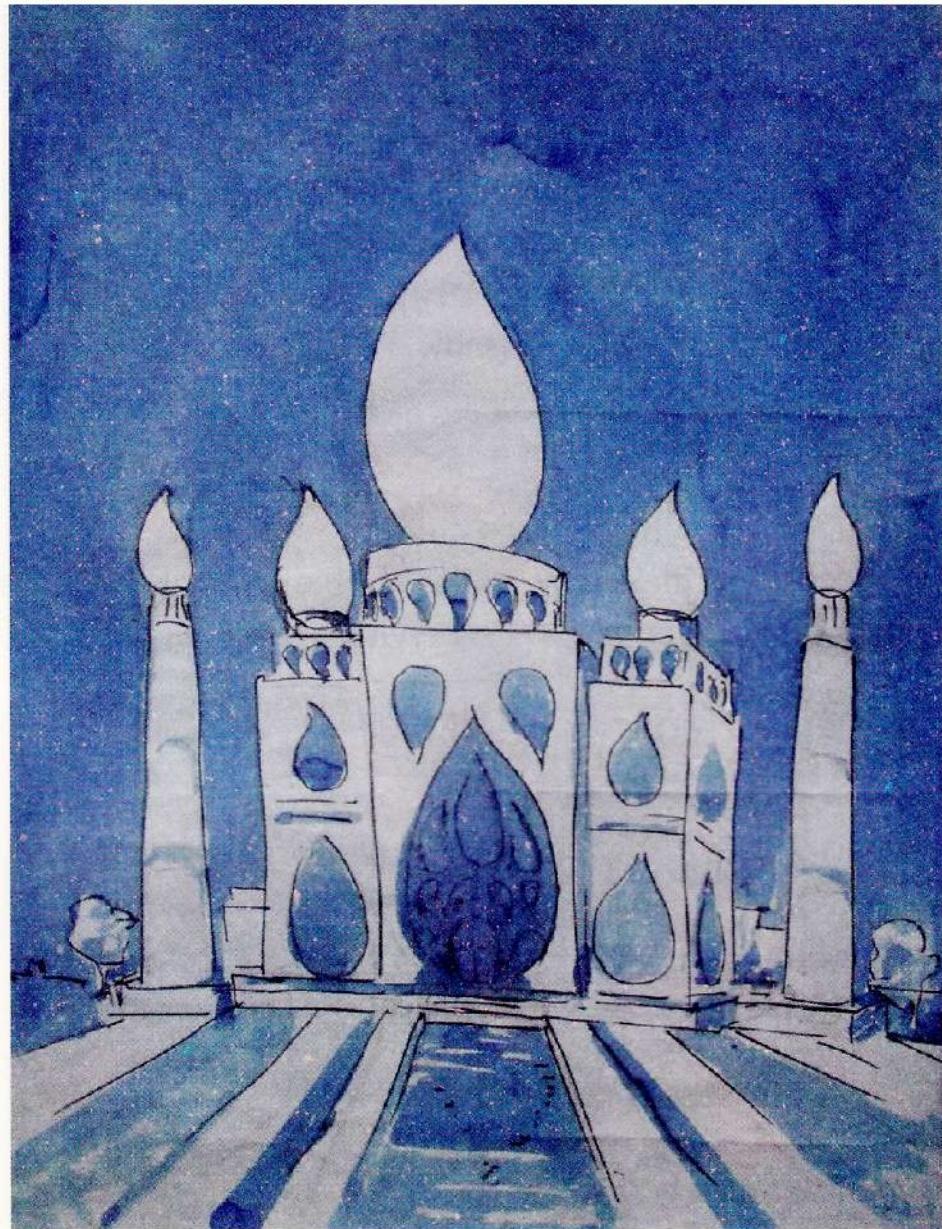
I believe very strongly that because of his skills & specialised knowledge he has a lot of duties & especially responsibilities towards mankind as a whole. He must also be an economist, a conservationist, an environmentalist, a team captain and a counsellor.

Liam Bally

9.1.7.

Tv.

What is an Architect?



If I remember correctly, the 'Taj' was the special architecture of Sava's Son, 'Nick' (I'm told it is now called "Sarasonic" architecture.)

I've often wondered why we call it one of India's 'Marvels'; then, in fact, it was a foreign architecture..

I've been studying India's most Indian (a world admired) design motif — that of the Common Mango and I think its simple beautiful 'Mango pattern' could well be used for our famous world-known buildings.

So I've been working on an intensive Indian architecture, and we could well design & use the 'truly Indian Mango' as the basis for our design for Public Buildings. So why not start with an alternative, truly Indian 'Mango Taj'.

You are India's architects of the future so let's hope you will use our Indian Mango as the inspiration for your buildings.

A happy Christmas & an exciting, profitable, satisfying New Year!

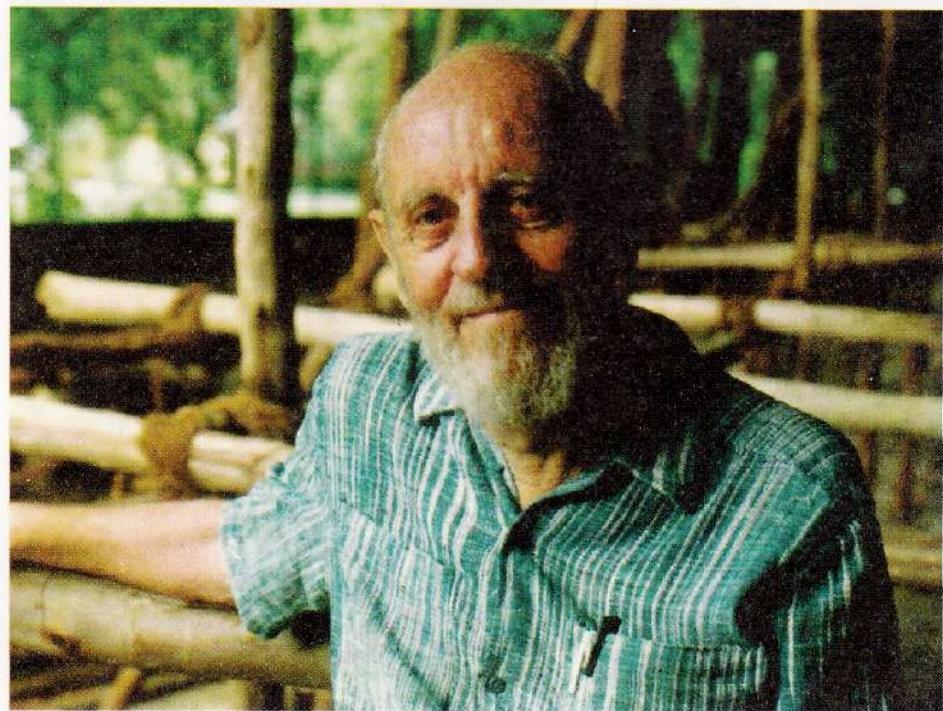
Yours  
Laurie Baker

## What is an Architect?

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Dr. Elizabeth Baker and Laurie Baker at 'The Hamlet'



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laurence Wilfred Baker was not just a well-known architect. He was also a cartoonist, a man who loved nature and above all, a humanist. He was a Gandhian in his thoughts and deeds. Born in 1917 he became an Associate of the Royal Institute of Architects in the United Kingdom after studying at the Birmingham School of Architecture. A chance meeting with Mahatma Gandhi inspired and introduced him into India in 1944. Following this he lived and worked in India helping his Kerala-born wife and medical doctor Elizabeth Baker and also practicing his architecture in meeting the housing and living requirements of the rural poor. It was in a remote village, Pithoragarh, in the Himalayan region where they built their home, hospital and school. In the mid-sixties the Bakers moved to Kerala and made it their home.



After moving to the city of Trivandrum in 1970, Baker built several buildings including numerous houses and institutions that were cost effective as well as environment-friendly. C. Achutha Menon, the visionary Chief Minister of Kerala during 1969-77 was an admirer and ardent supporter of Baker's philosophy and approach to building construction. So was K.N. Raj, one of India's outstanding economists. Baker was closely associated with several governmental and other public institutions to advise on matters relating to cost effective building technology. He also mentored a large number of young architects who came to work and live in Trivandrum. He authored several books imparting knowledge on housing and building construction. He also drew cartoons and was also a painter. He and his wife led a life of simplicity and service. Laurie Baker passed away on 1 April 2007 and Elizabeth Baker passed away on 11 March 2011.

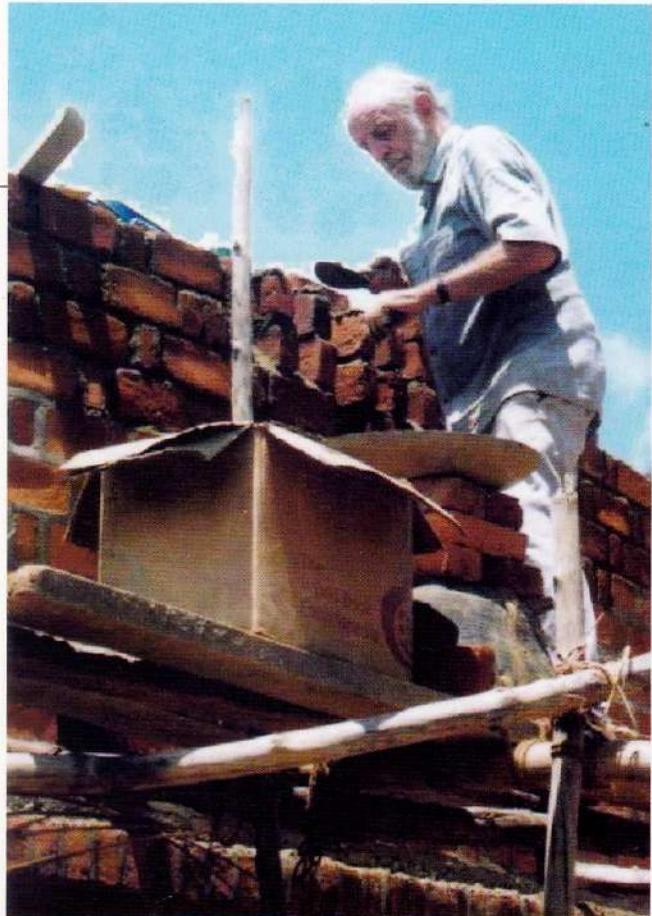
What is an Architect?

## What is an Architect?

Laurie Baker

"Bricks to me are like faces. All of them are made of burnt mud, but they vary slightly in shape and colour. I think these small variations give tremendous character to a wall made of thousands of bricks, so I never dream of covering such a unique and characterful creation with plaster, which is mainly dull and characterless. I like the contrast of textures of brick, of stone, of concrete, of wood."

Price: Rs.50/-



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